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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001217

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MCAP](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: ARAGUA GOVERNOR: OPPOSITION MUST STRIVE FOR
GRADUAL GAINS

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) Summary. Aragua Governor Didalco Bolivar, of the formerly pro-Chavez party Podemos, told the Ambassador August 22 that he expects the opposition to win five or six governorships and over 130 mayorships in November. Bolivar stressed that such electoral gains should be considered a significant advance in what he described as a long-term democratic fight against a "dictator." Bolivar, a former campaign advisor to Chavez, said Chavez is more concerned about rivals within Chavismo than opposition leaders. Bolivar believes Chavez is focused on perpetuating himself in power after 2012, not state and local campaigns. The Aragua Governor expressed particular concern about the military reform decree and said he intends to try to generate popular support for Venezuela's re-entry into the Andean Community. Bolivar is one of a number of high profile politicians and opinion-makers from across the political spectrum expressing concern to us over Chavez's increasing authoritarianism. End Summary.

State and Local Elections

2. (C) The Ambassador hosted Aragua Governor Didalco Bolivar for an August 22 breakfast at his residence. Bolivar asked to see the Ambassador to express his concerns about President Chavez's growing authoritarianism. Bolivar said he is telling other opposition leaders that they need to prepare for a long-term democratic struggle against Chavez. "Chavez is governing like a dictator," the Aragua Governor insisted, "and it will take 10 to 15 years to defeat him democratically." In that context, Bolivar said the opposition should consider winning 5 or 6 of 22 gubernatorial races in November an important victory. Bolivar also predicted the opposition would win over 130 mayoral races, including Venezuela's most populated cities.

3. (C) Noting that he was Chavez's campaign coordinator in central Venezuela for several years, Bolivar asserted that Chavez is not really campaigning hard for his candidates. Bolivar suggested that Chavez is more afraid of long-time close associates Diosdado Cabello and Jessie Chacon winning their races than he is of their respective opposition candidates. He also noted that many of Chavez's favored candidates are not campaigning with a message because their ultimate intention after winning is to transfer their state and local powers back to Chavez. On the other hand, certain

presumably strong pro-Chavez candidates, such as Henri Falcon in Lara State and Jose Gregorio Briceno in Monagas State, represent a real threat to Chavez's efforts to centralize even more authority. If elected, neither Falcon nor Briceno is likely to be willing to transfer effective authority back to the national government.

14. (C) Asked about the opposition's efforts to unite, Bolivar expressed optimism that the opposition would present consensus candidates in virtually all state and local races by September 15. Noting that Aragua was the only state that conducted a primary among opposition candidates, he faulted the opposition for not being more democratic and for perpetuating nepotism and cronyism. He said consensus Aragua gubernatorial candidate Henry Rosales received a big boost in the polls after winning the opposition primary. He faulted Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez for not seeking a primary in his bid for the Caracas mayorship, which he believed would have made it much more difficult for the Comptroller to declare him ineligible to run.

15. (C) Bolivar said he doubted Chavez would postpone the state and local elections because he believes Chavez is already focusing on how to perpetuate himself in power after his term of office expires in 2012. Bolivar suggested Chavez may dissolve the National Assembly in 2009 and run for an elected leadership position within the legislature. In this scenario, Bolivar said Chavez would secure the presidency for his 28-year-old daughter and control the Venezuelan government from a newly created position ("akin to Putin"). (Comment: We don't see this as particularly plausible or persuasive. End Comment).

Military Reform Decree

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16. (C) Of the 26 decree-laws Chavez signed on July 31, Bolivar said he is most concerned about the military reform decree. He believes that Chavez will try to use the popular militia, elevated in the decree on par with the traditional branches of power, to perpetuate himself in power. Noting that the new decree does not mention Venezuelan nationality as a prerequisite for membership in the popular militia, Bolivar suggested that Chavez intends to incorporate members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) into it. Bolivar said his state government is publicizing the text of the decree law in print and internet to try to generate greater public consciousness -- inside and outside the military -- of the dangers of the planned reform.

BRV Foreign Policy

17. (C) The Aragua Governor also told the Ambassador that he intended to organize a referendum drive to restore Venezuela's membership in the Andean Community. Bolivar plans to meet with left-wing supporters in Colombia to try to generate international support for his idea. Bolivar argued that Chavez is interested in multilateral bodies only to the extent that he can control or use them for political purposes. He stressed that he believes Chavez is not interested in CAN or MERCOSUR membership if these bodies tie his hands internationally. With respect to international models, Bolivar said Chavez is increasingly conflating his admiration for Belarus with his long-time fascination with Cuba.

Comment

18. (C) Embassy's contacts, whether from the left, like

Didalco Bolivar, or from the right, are increasingly criticizing Chavez as an authoritarian dictator, albeit one elected democratically. They stress that while Chavez accepted the electoral defeat of his constitutional reform package in December 2007, he has nevertheless pursued numerous defeated proposals via the 26 decree-laws he issued on July 31. There is broad consensus within the opposition, including Bolivar's Podemos party, a former pro-government party, that Chavez does not intend to let the constitutional referendum or the upcoming state and local elections impede his effort to centralize more power and impose further statism on the economy.

19. (C) Despite Bolivar's optimism, the opposition still appears to be consumed with disputing among themselves their potential electoral gains rather than advancing a viable, united democratic alternative. At the same time, the private sector is clearly protecting its own interests, which in those sectors not yet nationalized continue to yield significant dividends in a country awash in oil revenues -- even as business leaders wash their hands over the implications of Chavez's recent moves to further centralize control of the economy.

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